

ZEN AND THE ART OF ADVISING STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

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Advisors of student organizations face many challenges, including holding students accountable while respecting their autonomy, dealing with challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and navigating their lack of training. Coupled with other professional obligations, it is common for advisors to feel stressed and under-prepared in their advising role. Given the increased interest in mindfulness, this article provides context on the practice of mindfulness meditation and explores how advisors can apply mindfulness principles in handling the challenges they face in their student organization advising role. Mindfulness meditation offers an opportunity for advisors of student organizations to incorporate best practices in reflection, emotional regulation, and handling uncertainty. Since the practice of mindfulness meditation requires no additional tools, costs, or formal training, it is a suitable option for busy professionals.

We're in such a hurry most of the time we never get much chance to talk.
The result is a kind of endless day-to-day shallowness, a monotony that leaves a person
wondering years later where all the time went, and sorry it's all gone.
—Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

Finishing up another late day, Oliver felt exhausted. His student affairs job keeps him busy, and he has more to do since the other assistant director left. With a late-night event for the student group he advises, he wonders how he can be present with so much going on. The practice of mindfulness meditation has been applied to everything from archery to motorcycle maintenance. This article provides recommendations for student organization advisors to incorporate mindfulness meditation into their professional lives.

Student organizations are a popular way to get involved; more than 25% of first-year students joined a student organization during their first year of university (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2015). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2018) stated that students develop essential job skills by developing their leadership capacity through co- and extracurricular organizations. Through student organizations, students establish structured relationships with their advisors (e.g., faculty, staff, and student affairs professionals) that often span the undergraduate experience. These connections transcend traditional academic and professional divisions and allow advisors to connect authentically with their interests and the student organization.

Studies show that effective advising of student organizations can help students connect personally with leadership theories and concepts (Rosch & Anthony, 2012), promote self-awareness through multiculturalism (Dungy, 2003), and keep students focused on their academic goals (Dunkel et al., 2014). For the general field of advising in higher education, student affairs organizations identify “advising and supporting” as a core competency for development (ACPA: College Student Educators International & NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015, p. 33). Texts meant for advisors of student organizations also echo related competencies and roles (e.g., Dunkel et al., 2014).

Though there are benefits for students and their advisors, less than half of student organization advisors felt prepared and competent in their roles advising student organizations (DeSawal, 2007), and 87% of faculty ad-

vising student organizations did not receive any training to advise their organization (Myers & Dyer, 2005). As organizations become more central to the student experience, more student affairs jobs require some element of advising student organizations. However, not all advisors face the same responsibilities; advising for highly structured student organizations (e.g., student government, fraternities, and sororities) is a more extensive and potentially more stress-inducing process than advising a smaller interest group.

In the context of larger advising commitments and those requiring balance with a full-time job, advisors of student organizations could benefit from a self-taught practice that increases their capacity for interpersonal communication and reflection. The literature has identified a few challenges that correspond well to this paper's recommendations for practicing mindfulness meditation: holding students accountable while respecting their autonomy (Miles, 2011) through acting with intention, dealing with challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI; Harper & Quaye, 2007) through listening non-judgmentally, and navigating their lack of training (Myers & Dyer, 2005) through being in the present moment. The practice of mindfulness meditation helps people develop their ability to pay attention, regulate their emotions, relieve distress, and cultivate well-being (Davis & Hayes, 2011) and could remedy the above challenges. The definitions of mindfulness and mindfulness meditation are presented next.

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION IN CONTEXT

While mindfulness meditation is historically associated with Buddhism, the practice is inherently non-denominational and is practiced by religious and secular people. Mindfulness is "the awareness that emerges from paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). These mindfulness principles are practiced through mindfulness meditation, where an individual focuses on an action; mindfulness meditation brings forth a state of mindfulness. Mindfulness meditation is popular because of its simplicity, as children and adults can readily start a practice. Since there are many definitions and experiences of mindfulness, the Kabat-Zinn (1994) definition will guide the recommendations presented here.

Mindfulness meditation first requires purpose or intention. To practice, the mind is intentionally focused on an action (e.g., mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of walking, mindfulness of thinking). Each small act of intention builds a store of mindfulness that brings an individual to the present moment. In the mindfulness literature, the present moment is being here and now. Csikszentmihalyi et al. (2005) describe this experience as being in a flow state or being totally engrossed in an action, requiring an intense degree of presence. Existing without thought or judgment gives rise to the present moment by creating distance between the individual and a problem or situation. Experiencing non-judgment is like watching passing clouds; one recognizes the cloud and its characteristics and allows the cloud to pass. The practitioner does not influence the shape of the clouds, the speed at which they pass, or whether they bring rain or snow. Treating thoughts as clouds encourages a healthy distance and a clear mind. A busy mind is less able to respond thoughtfully or intentionally (Davis & Hayes, 2011).

MINDFULNESS PRINCIPLES APPLIED TO ADVISING STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

While most Westerners acknowledge that exercise and diet are essential for physical health, the importance of mental health and mindfulness is new. In its simplest form, mindfulness meditation is attention brought to an activity; it takes no time away and gives time by bringing the practitioner into the present moment. Noticing when the mind wanders and redirecting it to the present activity takes less than a second. The recommendations presented here support an advisor's mindfulness practice and their practice while advising student organizations.

Balancing Accountability and Autonomy

As a mentor, the advisor of student organizations must guide their students toward independence while instilling a sense of accountability. Creating this balance is a central role of the advisor (Dunkel et al., 2014; Miles, 2011). While the advisor might default to the traditional role of the adult in the room, they should be aware of

how they influence their students. Beyond providing guidance, the advisor must also create a conducive learning environment for their students' personal and academic growth. Advisors might find the mindfulness meditation practice of setting an intention helpful. Engaging with this practice can re-center their focus, increase their ability to communicate interpersonally, and encourage deeper reflection. Before a meeting with students, the advisor can set an intention such as "I want to listen deeply to their concerns" or "I want to help without getting in the way." By clarifying their actions and building a store of mindfulness, advisors can strengthen their subsequent interactions and better serve their students.

Navigating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

With the increasing diversity of higher education, advisors of student organizations are expected to navigate challenges related to DEI (Harper & Quaye, 2007). The mindfulness principle of non-judgment informs the awareness of thoughts as they enter the mind. Particularly, the advisor should be aware of their judgments that lead to bias and action based on bias. For example, negative bias toward a specific racial group might lead to action that inadvertently disadvantages that group. In a university context, students experiencing prejudice in intergroup contexts often experience negative emotional states, leading to further discomfort with outgroup members (Tropp, 2003). The advisor must recognize and become aware of their judgments to help better serve their students.

Within mindfulness literature, a recommended way to practice non-judgment is to realize when the mind is judgmental. This metacognitive process brings attention to the thousands of thoughts that flood the mind. When a judgmental thought arises about an individual and their identity, the thought should be recognized. It might be helpful to think, "a judgmental thought has arisen." Recognizing the thought creates a gap between the initial thought and another thought or action. The advisor might find that letting go of the thought by metaphorically allowing it to pass by like a cloud is enough to return to a state of non-judgment. Through repetition, judgmental thoughts become easier to recognize, let go of, and help bring the advisor into the present moment to deal with the current situation.

Ambiguity and Lack of Training

Since a majority of advisors of student organizations do not receive training, they often face situations they are unprepared for (Myers & Dyer, 2005). This ambiguity encourages us to respond with mindfulness in the present moment. Responding in the present moment is easier when there is a historical record of behavior, thoughts, and feelings. Journaling addresses these concerns. The advisor can begin by keeping a record of their advising experiences. While the advisor can evaluate their feelings or thoughts, the focus should be non-judgment and detachment. Shifting the focus from "I feel angry" to "there was a feeling of anger" encourages a healthy distance from strong emotions. Distance is not avoidance; cultivating distance means experiencing the emotion fully and intentionally letting it go or "getting on with it." As journaling progresses and the advisor feels an increasing presence, they can behave flexibly. A flexible advisor recognizes that the challenges of last year, last week, or even yesterday might differ from today's challenges. For example, COVID-19 has impacted how students gather for events and in-person initiatives. The flexible advisor can approach this situation with fresh eyes and propose new strategies for engaging the community, as the uncertainty makes it difficult to rely on past experience. The advisor can encourage students to collaborate with other organizations on campus, create engaging online events, and create online spaces for continued engagement.

CONCLUSION

While there is scholarship that helps advisors of student organizations develop their advising capacity, introducing mindfulness principles is a novel approach. Kabat-Zinn (1994) identifies three components of mindfulness (i.e., intention, presence, and non-judgment) developed through mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation contains a series of techniques and perspectives that can be practiced without any religious affiliation or formal training. Through activities like journaling, setting intentions, and becoming aware of thought patterns, advisors of student organizations can incorporate the helpful and relevant practice of mindfulness meditation into their advising work.

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